Bring Back the Light Infantry!

Projecting Combat Power More Effectively

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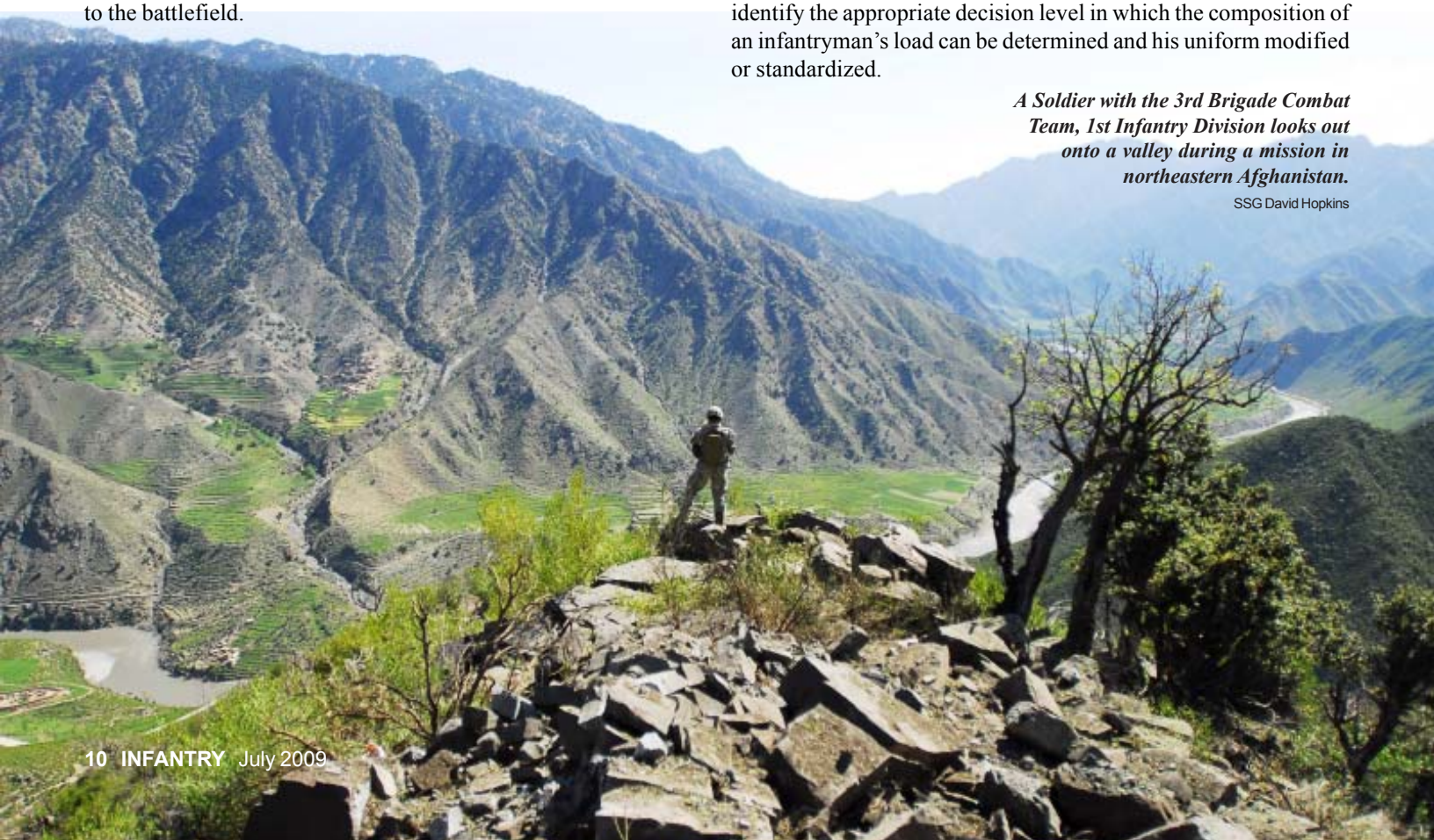
The only way to effectively manage a Soldier's load and to prescribe the most effective uniform for the mission at hand is to regulate it at the appropriate level. Our current tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) are centralized around armored guntrucks and are constraining our adaptability to defeat insurgents who find sanctuary in restrictive terrain. The freedom to make decisions that enhance our small unit's rapid adaptability needs to be authorized by combatant commanders. An infantryman should not be limited by his vehicle platform, load or his uniform because he will not be able to maintain the tempo of the operations required. This burden becomes an issue for mobility and resupply when operating in restrictive environments for lengthy periods of time. Soldiers who are fatigued by their gear will lose focus and inadvertently surrender initiative to the enemy. In addition, the infantryman who is bound to a vehicle platform for resupply and mentally conditioned that armor is an essential factor for his survival loses the mobility and mental lethality that a light infantryman brings to the battlefield.

It should be understood that this is not an article that analyzes how to manage a Soldier's load or describes its effects because it targets an audience that already understands that. There are many articles written about the Soldier's load and also to educate leaders on how to manage it. Instead, this particular work intends to focus entirely on the infantryman who conducts lengthy dismounted operations that are intended to project combat power into areas that are not reachable by vehicles. For the purpose of this article, the term "lengthy" is defined as operating for more than 48 hours away from shelter and mobile support platforms, such as armored gun trucks, Bradleys, and Stryker vehicles. In addition, advanced skill level training should be emphasized such as long range marksmanship, orienteering, direct fire control (as to conserve ammo) and fire support coordination which will enable small light infantry units to operate for long periods in insurgent safe zones (An "insurgent safe zone" is defined in this article as an area where the insurgent can operate with impunity). This article will then identify the appropriate decision level in which the composition of an infantryman's load can be determined and his uniform modified or standardized.



A Soldier with the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division looks out onto a valley during a mission in northeastern Afghanistan.
SSG David Hopkins

The Infantryman's Role in COIN and His Tempo

"It was particularly significant that in this modern age of troop movement by aircraft, helicopters and sophisticated armored personnel carriers, the ability of infantry to move overland on foot became a strategic issue."

— Harry G. Summers, British Army; Falklands War

The light infantryman's unique value in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations is that he can project combat power in the non-permissible terrain that becomes an insurgent safe zone. He does this by moving constantly under austere conditions, fights within small arms range, and closes with his enemy to destroy him. His tempo is maintained through operating in this manner because from this he arrives without warning and suffocates the enemy in his own sanctuary. This ultimately gains the initiative that enables follow-on full spectrum operations. In doing this, light infantry combat differs from other ground combat because of the intense physical and personal nature of it.

The operational need for light infantry to project combat power in this fashion is because the insurgent sanctuaries will most likely be out of range of the Army's ground vehicle platforms and nestled in terrain that is not accessible by tracked or wheeled vehicles. By seeking sanctuary there, the insurgent finds a safe zone and from there he can refit and project his lethality and influence into areas occupied by the Army. For the Soldier to penetrate these insurgent safe zones and conduct successful COIN operations, he will need to move by foot himself. To perform this function, his load and uniform will have to be modified based on the unique and immediate needs of the mission. The importance of this modification is described by USMC MAJ William L. Ezell in his 1992 Marine Corps Command and Staff College report "Battlefield Mobility And The Soldier's Load." He wrote, "The weight a soldier can carry is based upon his weight, the climate, the terrain over which he will move, and the stress he has faced and is currently under."

This is also true for his uniform. The infantryman's uniform includes heavy and cumbersome body armor that is not always mission essential but yet is mandated from the theater level. It has become an issue that directly affects survivability and mobility. If one is to mandate the infantryman's load and uniform, one has to consider the practicality of its use in the mission as an essential factor in composing it. Not one standard uniform set or one load is compatible with the needs of all missions.

Also, the complexity of the COIN environment further complicates the mandating of the uniform and load for the individual infantryman. MAJ Ezell goes on to cite: "About 1900, the French, British, and Germans began experimenting with the weight and placement of the individual soldier loads. Working separately, all three countries reached the same conclusion: the maximum load which soldiers carry should not exceed one-third of their own body weight."

The weight of the current body armor requirement generally reaches almost half of that factor, and if the Soldier carries a sustainment load then the combined weight will far exceed it. Considering this inhibiting factor, the light infantryman — clad in body armor — must discard a significant portion of his sustainment load and thus be constrained to immediate access to his vehicle platform for support. This constraint greatly limits the light infantryman's flexibility to pursue the enemy into his sanctuary.

The differences between urban, rural, mountain, and jungle operations make the task a small unit must accomplish reliant upon using customized uniforms and loads. Mandating an all encompassing standard may be convenient for higher echelons to comfort themselves with the idea that standards and discipline are being maintained, but it's at a terrible cost to the infantryman who is actually at the point of execution. An example of this is when an infantry squad or platoon has to leave behind critical supplies like water and food because they can't afford to carry the extra weight coming from carrying excessive body armor, such as side plates and layers of Kevlar in addition to his ballistics plates and helmet, not to mention the cumbersome Kevlar arm guards known as DAPS (Deltoid and Axillary Protector Set). In many cases, during lengthy operations in restrictive terrain, the infantryman's stealth and speed will enhance his survivability more than his body armor. However, for the infantryman to project combat power in COIN he needs mobility in restrictive terrain. This creates an additional burden on the unit to conduct frequent resupplies in order to maintain the squads and platoons during these lengthy operations. The whole focus of the company and/or battalion can easily become consumed with the resupply of these lower echelon units. The choices will have to be weighed on choosing the trigger where we will we sacrifice the *appearance* of survivability for actual mobility and lethality.

Maintaining the Light Infantryman in COIN

"In order to make assured conquests it is necessary always to proceed within the rules: to advance, to establish yourself solidly, to advance and establish yourself again, and always prepare to have within reach of your army your resources and your requirements."

— Frederick the Great: Instructions for His Generals, ii, (1747)

Supplying infantry platoons operating in terrain impassable to vehicles is a difficult task for the battalion's forward support company. The typical solution is to resupply them by air, using either rotary wing assets (sling load or internal load with speedballs/kicker pallets) or fixed wing assets (low or high altitude drops). Aerial resupply is beyond the scope of this article. The concepts of employing them are well understood, and many excellent articles have been written about their employment. Unhappily, the demand for aviation assets in theater far exceeds the available supply, and thus can't be relied upon for routine replenishment of small, autonomous light infantry units operating several kilometers from their base. Still, Soldiers operating under those circumstances can be replenished forward without using aviation assets. One TTP for doing this is for the forward support company (FSC) to move the logistics package (LOGPAC) to a specified logistics release point (LRP), and for the platoons to come pick up their supplies. Logisticians may be tempted to use this method in an austere environment. However, doing so severely limits the range of the dismounted Soldiers, who now must march from their positions to the LRP, and carry two or three days' worth of supplies

that distance. The issue is not that our Soldiers are incapable of doing that; rather, it is that the time and energy they spend on their own logistical support could be better spent going after the enemy. These resupply issues affect a company-level unit's ability to plan and conduct lengthy operations in restrictive terrain and hence affect the insurgent safe zone. The Army unit then becomes limited to where his trucks can take him, or dependent on delivery by air, which is subject to the weather and vulnerable to enemy fire. The endstate of these limitations is a light infantry unit that is mentally attached to its maneuver platforms and is limited to these capabilities.

When higher echelons set conditions that constrain the small unit to being bound to operate within arms length of a vehicle support platform, the vehicle then becomes the signature around which all of his planning and execution revolves. With the vehicle as the support node, it becomes the hub of the wheel from which the spokes protrude to project combat power and thus limits the infantryman to its capabilities. More critical is the second order effect on the mentality of the U.S. infantrymen that is being forged as a result of this modus operandi. This is that the infantryman who is bound to a vehicle platform for resupply and mentally conditioned that his platform is an essential factor for his mobility, sustainability and survivability and will forgo the mobility and mental lethality that a light infantryman brings to the battlefield.

Techniques and Constraints

"Every unit that is not supported is a defeated unit."

— Maurice de Saxe,
Mes Reveries, XIII, 1732

When looking to penetrate, disrupt and destroy insurgent safe zones, the infantry Soldier will be out of his comfort zone having to exist without his truck, Stryker, LAV or Bradley. He will feel vulnerable against an enemy and automatically assume the enemy has the advantage. Throughout the military, the mentality that equates success with being dependant on armored vehicles is extending into the perceived need to armor up the Soldier to the same extreme. New, exuberantly heavy body armor is being issued that credible leaders are beginning to question.

According to a FOX news report on 27 February 2008, "Marine Commandant GEN James Conway wants to know who authorized the costly purchase of the nearly 30-pound flak jackets and has ordered the Marine procurement officers at the Quantico base in Virginia to halt the rest of an unfilled order, FOX News has learned. 'I'm not quite sure how we got to where we are, but what I do know is it is not a winner,' Conway told FOX News at the end of his recent trip to Iraq ... The Marine Corps commandant and his sergeant major, Carlton Kent, became aware of the problem during a Thanksgiving visit to Iraq. At town hall meetings, few Marines raised their hands when asked if they liked the new equipment. Conway and his team refused to wear the vests during their visit to Iraq last week due to their weight and impracticality."

The immobilization of a Soldier due to his load can also be seen from operations in Grenada. A firsthand account of an 82nd Airborne Soldier in Operation Urgent Fury stated: "We attacked to secure the air head. We were like slow moving turtles. My rucksack weighed 120 pounds. I would get up and rush for 10 yards, throw myself down and couldn't get up. I'd rest for 10 to 15 minutes, struggle to get up, go 10 yards, and collapse. After a few rushes, I was physically unable to move, and I am in great shape. Finally, after I got to the assembly area, I shucked my rucksack and was able to fight, but I was totally drained."

Though the Soldier is referring to his ruck sack, 30 pounds of body armor could have had a similar affect on today's light infantryman. His body armor, ammo, weapon, night sight, water and food can easily amount to a load that he cannot both carry and fight in. Since body armor is part of the uniform in both Afghanistan and Iraq, its weight many times becomes overlooked when planning the Soldier's load. This leads the units into executing their missions in manners which always keep them within distances of their vehicle platforms, since they already are encumbered by the load which is their body armor.

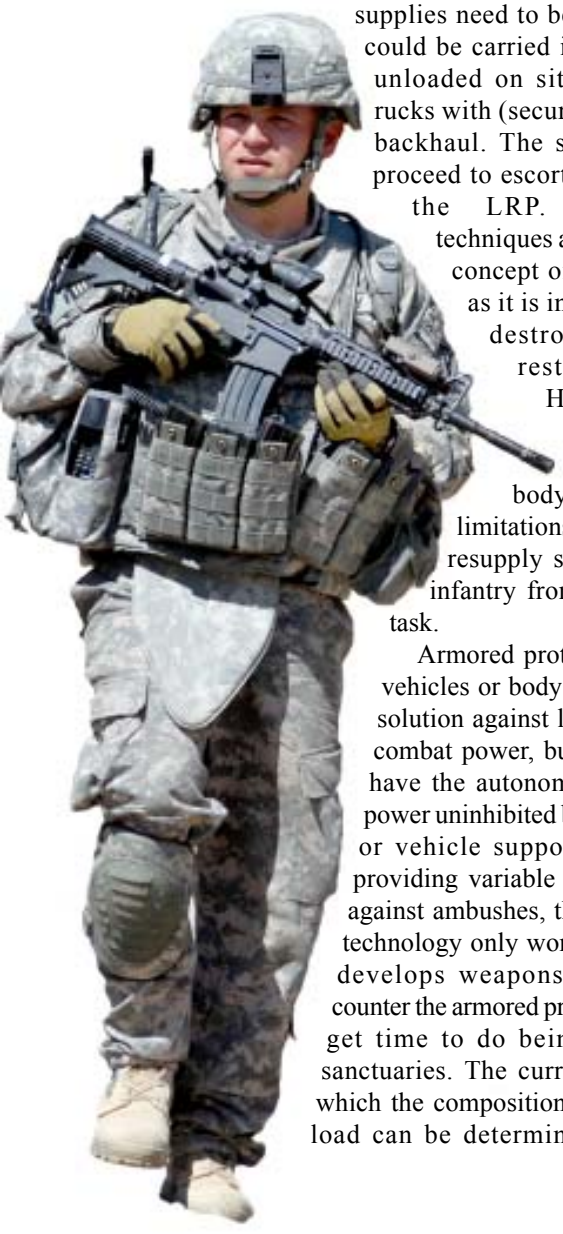
There are techniques that can supplement light infantry in lengthy, autonomous operations in restrictive terrain. An optimal technique is known as "tailgate resupply," although here the term "foxhole resupply" is more apt, as the supplies are being pushed to Soldiers in positions that are impassable to vehicles. By pushing supplies from the forward operating base (FOB) to the foxhole, the Soldiers of the FSC sustain combat power twofold: they extend the number of days the infantry company can operate in an insurgent sanctuary, and they conserve their energy by sparing them the requirement to move long distances under heavy loads. The question then becomes: How will the FSC push supplies to troops in the field if HMMWVs are unable to reach the fighting positions, and air isn't available?

One recommendation would be the use of light vehicles, either off-road capable utility vehicles or 4WD civilian trucks. The Toyota Hilux is a good example of the latter, and examples of the former include the John Deere Gator and the Polaris Ranger. Many other companies manufacture similar vehicles and some are available with diesel engines. Also, host nation forces typically use civilian-type 4WD trucks. These all have an advantage over up-armored HMMWVs in that their smaller frame allows them to traverse narrower roads and trails, while still hauling over 1,000 pounds of gear. A less conventional method is the use of pack animals, as established by FM 3-05.213, *Special Forces Use of Pack Animals*. The requirements for employing and caring for pack animals, along with their acquisition, training, and movement to theater, presents a logistical challenge in its own right. However, an innovative solution was employed by 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division in Afghanistan. According to the 1 June 2008 Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Lesson of the Day, elements of 3-1 IBCT were able to contract for animal support through local sources. This enabled them to push supplies forward without relying on air assets. Further, it provided economic benefit to the local communities who provided the service. These vehicles and/or animals can be cached out of the enemy's range of awareness, and the unit can then move by foot in order to maintain stealth, still having a more feasible support platform that enhances rather than compromises their mobility.

There are two constraints with these techniques. The first is the obligation of the unit to commit to the defense of the equipment if compromised and attacked.

Instead of evading, the unit is restricted by the platform because to abandon the equipment to the enemy further signifies failure. The other constraint is the compromise to their lethality. Because the small unit must guard these platforms while conducting the next phase of the mission, it then loses a portion of its combat power which reduces its lethality. Hence the use of a small, more maneuverable platform is feasible given the unit is composed of two squads or greater, so that there will be ample combat power to secure the cache and still project lethality.

Another method, whose history possibly predates the use of pack animals, is the use of porters (colloquially referred to as Sherpas when operating in mountainous terrain, such as in some regions of Afghanistan). It would be possible to contract local laborers to serve as Sherpas. Further, just as the light infantryman would be capable of marching to an OP to reach a resupply point, so would FSC Soldiers be able to march to the OP. The model proposed here would be for an FSC CLP to push supplies as close to the Soldiers as terrain would allow using vehicles. They would rendezvous with a dismounted security team from the supported unit, who would proceed to escort them on foot to where the supplies need to be delivered. Supplies could be carried in rucks, either to be unloaded on site or exchanged for rucks with (securely bagged) trash for backhaul. The security team would proceed to escort the Sherpas back to the LRP. These resupply techniques are congruent with the concept of using light infantry as it is intended, to locate and destroy the enemy in restrictive terrain. However, the burden of armored vehicle platforms and heavy body armor, and also the limitations on our conventional resupply system limit the light infantry from accomplishing this task.



Armored protection in the form of vehicles or body armor is a temporary solution against lesser forms of enemy combat power, but the small unit must have the autonomy to flex its combat power uninhibited by the burden of armor or vehicle support platforms. While providing variable degrees of protection against ambushes, the culture of armored technology only works until the insurgent develops weapons and techniques to counter the armored protection, which he will get time to do being left alone in his sanctuaries. The current decision level in which the composition of the infantrymen's load can be determined and his uniform modified or standardized is echelons above the tactical level in the COIN environment. A lower level for making load and uniform decisions should be authorized so that leaders at these levels will be enabled to enhance the infantryman's lethality in order to project combat power into insurgent safe zones.

According to numerous leaders in the Army, the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are captains' wars and platoon leaders' fights. We trust these officers with strategic decisions and the lives of Soldiers on the ground. It is these officers whose decisions directly result in the accomplishment of their mission and the survivability of their Soldiers, and they should have the flexibility to operate in a uniform that best fits the mission.

As the insurgency in Afghanistan gains momentum and the political climate simultaneously limits our ability to use air-delivered munitions and artillery that cause civilian casualties, we will have to fall back to meeting the enemy on his ground and force him to fight us face-to-face. The more we hide behind our armor, the more emboldened and adaptive our enemy will become. Yet we are constrained by the armored truck which has become our small unit support platform, and this is the second order effect of carrying cumbersome body armor that makes it unfeasible to carry a sustainment load capable of lasting more than two days. This constraint is preventing us from hunting our enemy where he finds sanctuary. To change this we need to decentralize the decision-making authority on the individual uniform to the company level. The mitigation to assuming risk by operating without armored protection should be extremely good tactical planning and dynamic leadership on the lowest levels. Greater errors have been made by higher echelons and to lesser consequence. With the company commander having the authority to upgrade or downgrade body armor and the support mechanisms to resupply his small units on lengthy operations, the conditions will be set for aggressive and innovative missions that will penetrate insurgent sanctuaries and suffocate his support network. Until we can accomplish this we will not be able to set the conditions for full spectrum operations with all the non-lethal enablers that are so necessary for victory in counterinsurgency operations.

MAJ Joseph Labarbera was commissioned as a Marine Corps officer in 1998 from Officer Candidate School and served as an artillery officer in the 10th Marines until transferring to the Army Infantry in 2002. His assignments include serving as assistant division plans officer for 10th Mountain G-3; Task Force 2-14 civil military operations officer (S5); commander of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry; an Iraqi Army brigade S-3 trainer as part of 2-15 Field Artillery; and the advisor to an Iraqi brigade's commando company. MAJ Labarbera also served as a reconnaissance troop trainer at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. He will next serve as a transition team chief and is set to deploy as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

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